Table Topics Contest – Hints and Strategies

PURPOSE:
Based on my experience this document provides some tips for preparing, attending and competing in Toastmaster Table Topics contests.

BACKGROUND
In November 2011 I won the District 70 Table Topics contest having won
- Lane Cove Toastmasters (field of 8)
- Area 47 (field of 5) Topic: “I saw red”
- Hawkesbury Division (field of 8), TT Topic: “It’s just not right” and finally
- District 70 as the first speaker in a field of 10 on TT Topic “To Change Yourself You Need to Take a Risk”

JUDGING CRITERIA
Start with the end in mind. What criteria will the Contest Judges be using to rate your speech against all others? The Table Topics Contest Judges Guide lists the following key speech areas as Excellent, Very Good, Good & Fair. They are weighted out of a Total Score of 100 allocated as follows:

30% SPEECH DEVELOPMENT - Opening, body, close, organization, smoothness
25% EFFECTIVENESS - Logic, directness, enthusiasm, achievement of purpose, audience response
15% PHYSICAL - Body language, appearance
15% VOICE - Flexibility, volume
15% LANGUAGE - Appropriate to speech, purpose and audience. Good grammar, pronunciation and word selection

TIP Concentrate on SPEECH DEVELOPMENT particularly opening, body and conclusion – love your content, use it to connect with your audience and all the rest will follow naturally

CONTROL NERVES, NEGATIVE SELF-TALK & DISTRACTIONS
- Leading up to the Contest – Only imagine yourself being excited and delighted to have the BEST Table Topic ever to respond to
- At the Contest Venue – Don’t get caught up in other people’s emotions, ambitions or nervousness – use any tool necessary to remain neutral and balanced e.g. iPod/MP3 playing music
- Avoid drinking alcohol or coffee
- Just before you Speak – Concentrate on blanking your mind and silencing mind chatter, otherwise to succumb to negativity will rob you of creativity and innovation

TIP Find or create a tool e.g. a mantra or empowering phrase or breathing exercise that helps you focus on one positive thing, like this moment to the exclusion of all else.

SELF BELIEF
Performing well, and perhaps even winning contests is NOT about the other contestants its about the power of your belief in yourself.

Many times I have seen contestants talk themselves out of winning because they have been intimidated by what they perceived to be a more experienced speaker in the competition line up, or like me for many years, for some reason e.g. due to lack of preparation I only deserved 2nd place. I have a display of 10+ 2nd Place plaques to demonstrate be careful what you wish for – you just might get it – again and again and again and again!
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CONTEST FORMAT
1. At the contest briefing, randomly selected numbered cards determine speaking order (I always ask the universe for my preferred speaking position, and even if I don’t get it, I accept that its part of my journey. For the record I have consistently been rewarded with my preferred place, either the second or the second last speaking spot)
2. All contestants are lead out of room
3. Each contestant is escorted back into the competition room in speaking order by the Sgt. At Arms
4. The TT Contest Chair will either read out the Table Topic, and/or ask the contestant to read it on the lectern.

TIP  You are being observed as soon as the audience and judges see you. Stand tall, walk confidently and avoid the ‘rabbit trapped by headlights’ look on your face.

TABLE TOPICS SPEECH STRATEGY
The BEST strategy I learnt during the 2011 Table Topics contest season was give myself permission to
• go up to the stage with a completely blank mind, and
• have the faith and courage to launch into whatever picture came to my mind as a result of the topic given

DON’T FEEL compelled to start speaking immediately. Rather centre yourself on the stage first. Catch an extra 10 seconds of thinking time. However the sooner you launch into the topic the more confident you will appear to the audience.

Make a connection with your audience and start something like (in increasing order of difficulty)
• Repeating the topic verbatim
• A Definition “What is…..”
• Rhetorical Question
• A Quotation (if they have one in their repertoire) that is suitable

For example, if the Contest Table Topic was “Stress”, a Rhetorical Question would be, “We all suffer from stress at one time or other? Stress is when…….”

TIP  Use your personal stories (fact or made up) as this relaxes you and the audience

Weave in examples or better still your own personal story which is great to demonstrate STRESS. You only have a few minutes, so after the introduction get straight into your key points or story.

As soon as the Green light comes begin to concentrate on your conclusion. If possible, round your speech off with whatever table topic you were given, e.g. “While STRESS has lots of negative attributes, we can also use it as a fighter uses the forward motion of his opponent to deliver the knockout blow. “

TIP  People remember the FIRST thing you say and the LAST. ALWAYS start and end STRONG.

MY JOURNEY TO DISTRICT 70 TABLE TOPICS COMPETITION
Firstly I am lucky to live a rich and varied life, driven by my manic insane curiosity about all things in this world. Therefore I have a rich resource of material to call from. You too have the same amount of material, you just need to bring it to just below consciousness, with practice, or recollection – health, interests, work, children, family, holidays – all are great sources of inspiration – ready and available to be called forth.

At Area 47 Table Topics contest(field of 5) on hearing the Topic: “I saw red” inspired me to instantly see a red traffic light. Then I remembered an embarrassing road rage incident to the audience, where the punch line was the driver to whom I had just berated for bad driving, looked past me, and said to my
I feel sorry for you mate!” I turned the topic onto myself and concluded with the statement that whenever “I saw red” I remembered that incident and “zipped my screaming howler”.

For Hawkesbury Division (field of 8) the Topic given was “It’s just not right” inspired feelings about my husband’s aversion and my frustration to changing anything around our house to make it easier to live in. I was able to use this phrase over and over again “Its just not right I have to stand at my front door preventing entry of any visitors to my house.” I related the story of me renovating 60% of my house without my husband’s consent or knowledge. I was actually in the process of doing it at the time of the competition so it was a heaven sent topic, that I could relate a current experience to.

The District 70 competition was held at the November 2011 Semi-annual conference gala dinner in Canberra. I was very surprised and initially dismayed to be placed as the FIRST of 10 contest speakers. This is often considered the NO WIN speaking position. I recovered from my shock – accepting and surrendering that this was meant to be, and returned to concentrating on centring myself using a short mantra (the same one that had helped win all previous competitions).

TIP It is not the situation but how you choose perceive it that determines your experience

THE TOPIC was “To Change Yourself You Need to Take a Risk”. I admit to nerves and as I listened it felt so long a topic, that I had forgotten the first half of the quote by the time the Contest Chair stated the second half. I could only remember the word “RISK”. I also completely forgot to look at the lectern where the topic was written on a piece of paper to reaffirm it.

The Topic inspired me to quote the actor WC Fields who recommended never acting with children and animals. I recounted the story of my rat speech at a Chatswood Early Risers meeting. Luckily it was a story I had told before about the two live rats (I took as props to extol the virtues of having them as pets) who immediately took fright when I put them on my shoulders half way through my speech, and headed off down the inside of my shirt. They ran circles around my middle as I completed the last 3 and a half minutes of my speech, all the while I had one hand up the inside of my shirt trying to catch them. The Evaluator on that occasion was rendered speechless – which connected and subsequently got a few knowing laughs from the predominantly Toastmaster audience.

The Risk I took was having never performed with an animal. I was conscious as I was speaking that I needed to finish my presentation strongly AND to link my story back to the table topic with something like, “I took a risk to perform with animals, and in the process I changed myself to be a better speaker because of it”

Despite being FIRST of 10 speakers, after the competition no less than four judges came up and commented that my performance made it difficult to judge the rest of the competitors. Some of the judges said to me that I had great organisation. There was another speaker tipped to win, and frankly I could not fault his delivery, while the last speaker of the competition was very funny and I felt got the most laughs – by the I wasn’t certain that I had even placed in the contest.

As the first competition speaker I got the opportunity to see all the other contestants perform (the first time in any TT comp I have been in). I saw a lot of their struggles, and when they chopped and changed subject matter, how much that distracted the audience into thinking how on earth they were going to bring this topic to a conclusion, rather than listening to their ideas and delivery. Never allow your audience to think anything other than what you want them to think.

Half the competitors ended up lecturing the audience, (2 or 3 went noticeably around in circles struggling with the topic), telling them that taking a risk was the right thing to do before adding (almost as an after-thought) a personal story.

I was the only person in the competition who told a story from the beginning to the end. Telling a story makes people relax, and also it had all important surprise factor of the rats disappearing down my shirt,
and an evaluator left speechless. Strategically because I was talking to a room full of Toastmasters, being speechless for an evaluation was something they could relate to.

Don’t worry if you haven’t got a story – just allow yourself to go with what feels right.

**PRACTICE SUGGESTIONS**

1. Print the suggested Table Topics questions at the end of this document.
2. Cut the paper so only one topic appears on each slip and place in a container.
3. To recreate the surprise element, simply select a slip of paper from the container, read the question and promptly launch into presenting a response.

**TIP**

Get someone to tell you, or read the question once or twice only, and then get rid of paper to avoid the temptation of rereading and disturbing the flow of your response.

**TIP**

Play this game full out. Pretend that you are there in the contest room. Like a musician practicing a piece of music, if you lose your place or make a mistake, recover and continue, do **not** stop your speech. In a real presentation this situation can and does happen. It only becomes significant to the audience, if you fail to deal with it in a professional manner, in other words, maintain composure and continue with your response to its logical conclusion.

**Evaluate the Adequacy of your Response.** Reviewing your delivery, content, organization and presentation is essential to improving your performance. If another person can observe you, then ask for their feedback. Were you convincing? What did they like? What could you improve? Sometimes it is good to give your evaluator a form with the specific areas you want them to assess, like "Did I talk too fast, if so, where?" If practicing on your own, staple the question slip to the top of a sheet of paper. Make notes about how you felt you performed, what went well, and indicate what you need to practice again to give a better response this question and why. These sheets become an excellent reference source for review of future responses or as checklists on similar subject matter.

Many people avoid listening to recordings of their voices, or even worse, seeing themselves performing on video. The rewards of reviewing your audio or visual performance far outweighs the impediments created by excessive self-judgement. Using recordings to confirm whether the required standard has been achieved, and to identify areas of improvement is now a standard practice for any serious performer. As World Public Speaking Champion, Ed Tate once said, "**You look like that. You sound like that. Get over it.**"

Listed below are the benefits of practicing a response out loud, just as if you were there:

- Being able to assume a relaxed state prior to being told the topic
- Avoiding auditory paralysis brought on by excessive stress or fear
- Enabling the analytical and logical parts of your brain to work creatively together
- Allowing access to a higher intelligence to assess how your response is progressing, and if not favourable, to have intellectual and emotional capacity to make adjustments to your presentation and/or engagement of the audience
- Becoming accustomed to instantly thinking and organizing your thoughts on any subject
- Increasing the likelihood of presenting confidently using appropriate voice and body language
- Confirm, practice and consolidate good performance techniques
- Develop and rehearse a repertoire of stories to illustrate any topic or theme
- Identify and address any weaknesses in presentation, organization and content, and
- Practice talking about yourself or any subject in a positive constructive way.

*Adapted from my Article at http://EzineArticles.com/2923753*

**TIP**

BE YOURSELF & ENJOY THE EXPERIENCE – this is **EXPONENTIAL/EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AT ITS BEST**
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SAMPLE TOPICS (* indicates table topics used in Toastmaster competitions)

Take the Road less Travelled*
There is always a light at the end of the tunnel*
Ignorance is Bliss
All the world’s a stage*
There’s no business like show business*
Stress*
The difference between try and triumph is a little ‘umph’.
The start is what stops most people.
Seize the day
Faster Higher Further
Effort is its own reward
Children are our future
Times are bad
More technology less communication
Work Life Balance
Slipping down the razor blade of life
Did I really say that?
Alls fair in love and war?
Fear
Courage
Frustration
Integrity
Focus
Creativity
People’s number one fear is public speaking
Be sincere; be brief; be seated
Healthy, Wealthy and Wise
The more you give, the more you get
Discover
Work is the refuge of people who have nothing better to do
An Apple a day
Your time is now
I often wonder..
I’m always being asked..